

# HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

*Sources and Interpretations*

VOLUME ONE THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

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contradictory. Spaniards have been sensitive to attacks upon their actions in America, particularly to the allegations — often made by their political enemies — that they mistreated the Indians, whom they considered as their wards to be protected and Christianized. One of the most reasoned defenses to be made in Spain was prepared by the eminent seventeenth-century administrator and judge, Juan de Solórzano y Pereyra (Reading 24). Contradictory interpretations still persist, especially among non-Spaniards, as will be seen by the concluding selections by two Americans — a historian who has written an outstanding work on colonial Mexico, and another historian who has concerned himself with the struggle for justice (Readings 25-26).

These contrasting opinions and perspectives on the essential contributions of Spain offer students an excellent opportunity to exercise critical judgment on what they read. This, after all, is one of the principal reasons we study history.

## THE FIRST CRY FOR JUSTICE IN AMERICA

### 12. *The Sermons of Friar Antonio de Montesinos, 1511*

It is symbolic that the struggle for justice was touched off by an almost unknown friar. No writings of Montesinos have come down to us, nor any picture of him, and of his life, after his famous sermons on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola we know little, except that he spoke once at court in Spain on behalf of the Indians and met his death while protecting them in Venezuela. Millions of Americans have never heard his name or been aware of his first cry on behalf of human liberty in the New World, which Pedro Henríquez Ureña termed one of the great events in the spiritual history of mankind. Our only records of his great moment in history appear in the royal instruction ordering him to be silent and in the *History of the Indies* by Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose description, written over four hundred years ago, conveys to us vividly the passion and the force of this first dramatic blow struck for freedom in the New World.

On the Sunday before Christmas in 1511 a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos preached a revolutionary sermon in a straw-thatched church on the island of Hispaniola. Speaking on the text "I am a voice crying in the wilderness," Montesinos delivered the first important and deliberate public protest against the kind of treatment being accorded the Indians by his Spanish countrymen. This first cry on behalf of human liberty in the New World was a turning point in the history of America and, as Pedro Henríquez Ureña termed it, one of the great events in the spiritual history of mankind.

The sermon, preached before the "best people" of the first Spanish town established in the New World, was designed to shock and terrify its hearers. Montesinos thundered, according to Las Casas:

In order to make your sins against the Indians known to you I have come up on this pulpit, I who am a voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behooves you to listen, not with care-

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less attention, but with all your heart and senses, so that you may hear it; for this is going to be the strangest voice that ever you heard, the harshest and hardest and most awful and most dangerous that ever you expected to hear. . . . This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in their illness? For with the excessive work you demand of them they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what care do you take that they should be instructed in religion? . . . Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? . . . Be certain that, in such a state as this, you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks.

Montesinos thereupon strode out of the church with head high, leaving a muttering crowd of colonists and officials behind him, who were astounded, but not one was converted. He had come as near to convincing his hearers of their wrongdoing as would a theological student in our day who delivered a soapbox philippic in Wall Street on the biblical text "Sell that which thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."

The colonists gathered at the house of the Governor, Diego Columbus, protested against the sermon as a scandalous denial of the lordship of the king in the Indies, and delegated a group which went indignantly to the monastery to exact an apology and disavowal. The vicar, Pedro de Córdoba, unimpressed by the delegation's threat to expel the offensive friar, assured them that Montesinos had spoken for the Dominican group. He promised, however, that Montesinos would preach the next Sunday on the same topic. The colonists thereupon retired, believing they had won their point.

Word of the expected retreat spread quickly, and the following Sunday most of the leading Spaniards crowded into the church. Montesinos mounted the pulpit and announced the disquieting text "Suffer me a little, and I will show thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf." Rather than explaining away his previous sermon with dialectic subtleties, he proceeded to belabor the colonists anew, with even more passion than before, warning them that the friars would no more receive them for confession and absolution than if they were so many highway robbers. And they might write home what they pleased, to whom they pleased.

These words were soon heard in Spain, even by the King. On March 20, 1512, Ferdinand ordered Governor Diego Columbus to reason with Monte-

sinos. If the Dominican and his brothers persisted in their error, previously condemned by the canonists, theologians, and learned men gathered to deliberate on the problem ten years before, the Governor was instructed to send them to Spain by the first ship so that their Superior might punish them "because every hour that they remain in the islands holding such wrong ideas they will do much harm."

Three days later on March 23, 1512, the Dominican Superior in Spain, Alonso de Loaysa, reproved Montesinos in an official communication to the Dominican Provincial in Hispaniola and ordered him to prevail upon the friars to stop preaching such scandalous doctrine. The Provincial was warned that no more friars would be sent if such preaching were permitted to continue.

Thus began the first great struggle for justice in the New World.

## FUNDAMENTAL LAWS

### 13. *The Requirement, 1513, a Most Remarkable Document*

One of the most dramatic and most debated documents in the history of Spanish America has been the Requirement or manifesto drawn up by jurists and theologians in Valladolid in 1513. It was designed to be read to Indians before hostilities could be legally launched, and was first employed in 1514 by the aged and vitriolic conquistador Pedrarias Dávila near Santa Marta. Later it was made part of the baggage that every conquistador carried to America, and it was used in a number of curious circumstances:

The Requirement was read to trees and empty huts when no Indians were to be found. Captains muttered its theological phrases into their beards on the edge of sleeping Indian settlements, or even a league away before starting the formal attack, and at times some leather-lunged Spanish notary hurled its sonorous phrases after the Indians as they fled into the mountains. Once it was read in camp before the soldiers to the beat of the drum. Ship captains would sometimes have the document read from the deck as they approached an island, and at night would send out enslaving expeditions, whose leaders would shout the traditional Castilian war cry "Santiago!" rather than read the Requirement before they attacked the near-by villages.\*

\* Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), p. 34.